

Book Reviews

RABASA, José. 2012. *Tell Me the Story of How I Conquered You: Elsewheres and Ethnocide in the Colonial Mesoamerican World*. Austin: University of Texas Press. ISBN 978-0-292-74761-6. Pp. 278. \$25.

Tell Me the Story of How I Conquered You undertakes a rich theoretical meditation on the textual performance of the Mesoamerican colonial scribe, or *tlacuilo*. Rabasa's analysis revolves around charta 46r of the 16th-century Codex Telleriano-Remensis (Bibliothèque nationale de France, fonds mexicain 385). Produced by indigenous scribes at the behest of Catholic missionaries, the codex combines pre-Columbian and European forms of writing and illustration. Rabasa argues that c.46r exemplifies modes of montage and juxtaposition that defy the will to dominate and master subaltern cultural expressions.

The first chapter lays out the vocabulary that Rabasa deploys in his study. Particularly important is the concept of *habitus* as utilized in medieval Scholasticism and, more recently, in Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theory. While scholastics used the term to outline techniques of Christian indoctrination, Bourdieu's definition deals with the influence of the community on the individual's creative work. As Rabasa puts it, Bourdieu's definition of *habitus* helps him to understand "the different backgrounds from which and against which the *tlacuilo*, the missionaries, and scholars today make and unmake worlds" (9). Rabasa argues that when missionaries requested the *tlacuilo*'s help in producing Telleriano-Remensis, they effectively asked her to unmake the Mesoamerican world and thus commit ethnocide. (Since it is not known who created c. 46r, Rabasa's use of the feminine pronoun reminds readers that, especially in the pre-Columbian setting, a woman could in fact be a *tlacuilo*.) Yet, the Mesoamerican world would re-emerge in the *tlacuilo*'s *habitus* as an intransigent *elsewhere* to Christian modernity. For Rabasa, this *elsewhere* opens up the possibility for ethnogenesis, the creation of "new" objects that elude the mastery of both missionary and *tlacuilo*" (13). An example of ethnogenesis is the *tlacuilo*'s use of three-dimensional perspective as a form of "wild literacy" (36).

Chapters 2 and 3 contain more detailed analyses of c. 46r. Along with Chapter 1, they form the heart of *Tell Me the Story of How I Conquered*

You. Chapter 2 begins with an anecdote that places the reader with Rabasa in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, where an ultra-vigilant librarian mistakenly reprimands Rabasa for his handling of the Telleriano-Remensis. Aside from highlighting the intense surveillance over the codex and its handlers, especially those deemed suspect, this anecdote serves as a basis for considering the production and history of the document. Rabasa goes on to provide compelling readings of the scenes and figures depicted therein, including the Mixtón War, the baptism of an indigenous person, and Dominican and Franciscan friars in their characteristic habits. Chapter 3 in particular deals with the *tlacuilo*'s use of perspective in depicting the friars. Crucially, Rabasa argues that these depictions return the gaze of the missionaries, thus threatening their evangelical project.

The remaining chapters (4–9) explore a number of philosophical issues spawned by Rabasa's analysis of the preceding chapters. Rabasa draws on theological treatises, legal petitions, and other texts that resonate with the concerns and contents of the Telleriano-Remensis. Chapter 6, for example, contains a particularly illuminating discussion of Book XII of the Florentine Codex. In contrast to the Telleriano-Remensis, the indigenous authors of Book XII utilized not only pictorial writing but also alphabetic script to tell the story of their conquest. Book XII's portrayal of the defeated Mexica leader Moteuczuma leads Rabasa to a fascinating reassessment of the Freudian concepts of melancholy and mania. This reassessment is part of Rabasa's larger political and philosophical project of subverting the supposed universality of Western epistemology.

Tell Me the Story of How I Conquered You thus invites readers to step outside disciplinary conventions and invent new vocabularies in considering non-Western forms of expression. A key component of this challenge is Rabasa's emphasis on "the intuition that recognizes that objects have a life of their own—that objects reveal selves and exceed the apparently unavoidable, all-too-human will to appropriation" (163). The destruction of pre-Columbian *amoxtli* (books) and creation of hybrid codices are supreme examples of the destructive will to appropriation. These hybrid codices would theoretically allow the missionaries to better understand and thus expunge Pre-Columbian lifeways. But as Rabasa argues, the Telleriano-Remensis and the Florentine Codex would exceed the aims of evangelization, creating *elsewheres* and the potential for ethnogenesis. Although both of these texts have garnered considerable scholarly attention, Rabasa breaks new ground in connecting them to past and current political struggles and social movements in Mexico. In this way, he provides new political and philosophical horizons for colonial and postcolonial studies.

At times, however, Rabasa leaves the reader wanting more of the close readings that drive his theoretical discussion. Particularly intriguing is the connection he makes between Francisco Tenamaztle, the indigenous insurgent depicted in c. 46r, and the god Tezcatlipoca, who appears in c. 5r. It is precisely in this connection between the pre- and post-Columbian elements of the Telleriano-Remensis that we begin to see the tantalizing possibilities of juxtaposition and montage that Rabasa champions. In a similar vein, his analysis of Book XII of the Florentine Codex only briefly considers the Nahuatl and pictorial portions of this text. As Rabasa acknowledges, these different mediums may tell a very different story of conquest. The slippage between text and image in Mesoamerican codices begs for further reflection from an interdisciplinary standpoint. *Tell Me the Story of How I Conquered You* serves as an impressive starting point for such reflection.

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